

## The Dramatic History of Duxbury Theatre

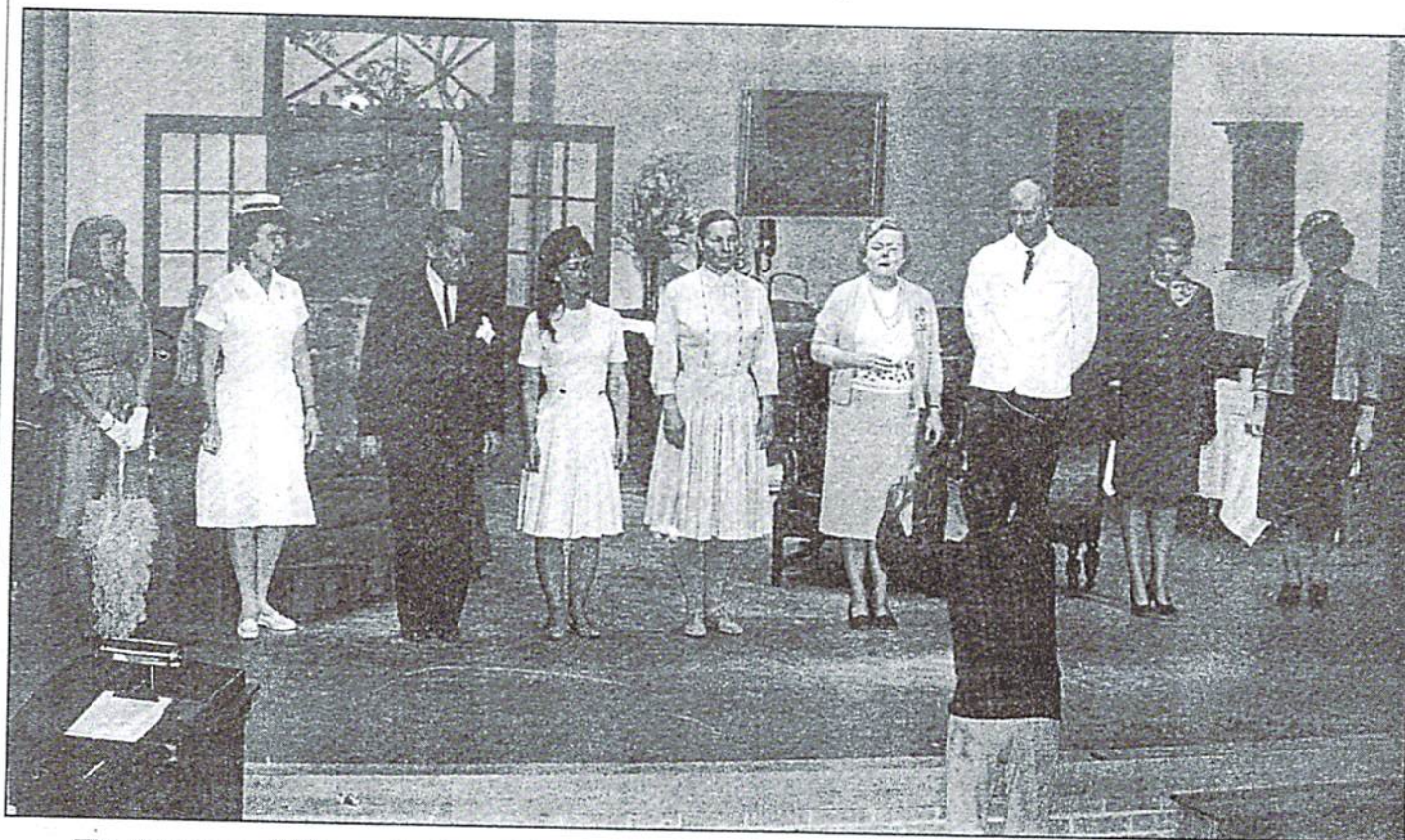
By JANICE NEUBAUER

For over a century, theater in Duxbury has been alive, sometimes well, sometimes not so well, sometimes gloriously vital.

For "one brief, shining moment" this community had the creme de la creme of summer theaters. The site was the former Bay Farm, a prime setting on the bay with a glorious view. The playhouse was an enormous barn, converted into a modern theater with a large revolving stage, spacious lobbies and a seating capacity of 350. It was true summer stock, with equity actors who lived on the premises. Players and crew were housed in an ancient farmhouse and auxiliary buildings; some used as offices, dining room and kitchen. Professional directors and scenic designers were on the staff, helped out by people willing to take minimal wages for the opportunity to learn from these professionals and for the experience. A different play was produced every week during July and August.

The equity actors were experienced professionals, and some went on to further fame on Broadway, in films, and in television. Some of these included **John Cassavetes**, **Kaye Ballard**, and **Claudia O'Neill** who went on to play the mother in the first Broadway production of "Raisin in the Sun."

Local talent augmented the professional actors, including **Roberta (Bobbie) Cutler** who had been in the drama club at Cornell and worked three years in summer stock. **Ruth Coffin**, a guiding light in the development and support of the theater, was another fine



The Bay Players' 50's production of *The Chalk Garden*, featuring Natalie Goodrich and Bobbie Cutler.

actress mentioned by people who shared memories with me, as was the gifted **Natalie Goodrich**, who remained active in local theater well into the seventies.

There was other community involvement as well. People from the community helped build the sets, sold tickets, had theater party dinners or cocktails, ushered, raised money.

How did this dream theater get its start?

In the late 1800's, with the railroad

came an influx of summer families who built or purchased large estates. Among these were theater families. Probably the most famous of these were the Seymours who had a home on Washington Street where they lived at least part of each year through several generations. **William Seymour** was a Broadway actor and director, his wife **May Davenport**, **Seymour** an actress and sister of the world-renowned Fanny Davenport who built her summer home in 1893 across the road from her sister's. **Fanny Davenport** and her actor husband **W. Melbourne MacDowell** did not appear before the public while living here, using their home as a respite from theater and spending much time on their cat boat, the *Fanny D.*

**Fanny Seymour Field**, daughter of William and May Seymour, wrote in the newly established *Duxbury Clipper* in 1950 that the Seymours and other theater families created lavish summer productions to entertain themselves, their friends and their neighbors. These continued until the First World War, and sometimes were produced on a larger scale in Mattakeesett Hall as fundraisers for churches and other community causes.

She mentions **Harold Kellogg**, architect of the elementary school building, who made scenery and devised "splendid lighting effects" without benefit of electricity and not without hazard. Among her memories is a performance at Mattakeesett Hall for the benefit of the Odd Fellows when an oil lamp was overturned. She was one of "a dozen or more little girls in cheesecloth dresses who were herded to the front of the stage and dropped off into waiting arms "so we wouldn't catch fire."

It was Fanny Seymour Field's daughter, actress **Joan Field**, who came back to Duxbury from the Broadway stage in 1945 with the dream of a summer stock theater. With her partner, director/producer **Albert Moritz**, she presented their plan and asked for financial backing until it could be made self-supporting. Community members would be needed to paint scenery, do props, sell tickets, and act. Only a few actors would be brought in from New York at "meager" salaries.

## The Duxbury Playhouse

Support was forthcoming and the Duxbury Players were born. The Duxbury Playhouse opened in the old GAR Hall on Washington Street, on the second floor. The building had its problems as a theater, with only a tiny stage and exits that opened to the outside staircases. An actor often had to go out one door, down the staircase, run around the building and up those stairs to make another entrance.

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Their most ambitious production in that space was Clare Boothe Luce's comedy, *The Women*. Bobbie Cutler played the vamp Crystal. People still talk about her bathtub scene. Joan Field acted in the productions, and Al Moritz directed.

The new company was competing with another semi-professional theater run by Franklin Trask of the Priscilla Beach Theatre, who was putting on productions up the street in Mattakeesett Hall. The Duxbury Players won the battle for audiences, and after Trask closed down, Field moved her productions to the more spacious Mattakeesett Hall.

There was increased financial support from backers **Elbert Harvey**, **Margaret Metcalf**, **C. Russell Eddy** and his wife, **B.F. Goodrich, Jr.**, **C. Winthrop Coffin** and others. Ruth Coffin remained an important benefactor of the new theater. Several years later, the Duxbury Playhouse board purchased the

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Bay Farm and converted the enormous barn into the Duxbury Playhouse, a unique and charming summer theater.

Many wore gowns and tuxedos to the gala opening of the 1949 season, and Duxbury writer **Cid Ricketts Sumner** cut the ribbon in the opening ceremony. One of her books had already been made into the movie, *Pinky*, a groundbreaking film about black people "passing" as whites. Sumner and Al Moritz of the playhouse had collaborated in creating a play based on her book, *Tammy out of Time*, and it would premiere at the Duxbury Playhouse later in the season. Her daughter, Bobbie Cutler, played a role in *Tammy*, as did Joan Field. Anne Shaw, the young actress who played *Tammy*, won a Broadway role in *As You Like It* starring **Katherine Hepburn** as a result of her performance.

The Duxbury Playhouse was "rated best of any summer theatre in New England, New York and New Jersey" by the end of the 1950 season.

In 1950, however, expenses had doubled from the previous season. Backers held a meeting attended by over a hundred people, with chairman Eddy and treasurer Harvey giving a full report. Changes were proposed, and a fund-raising campaign was begun. Up to that time, \$50,000 had been invested in the Duxbury Playhouse.

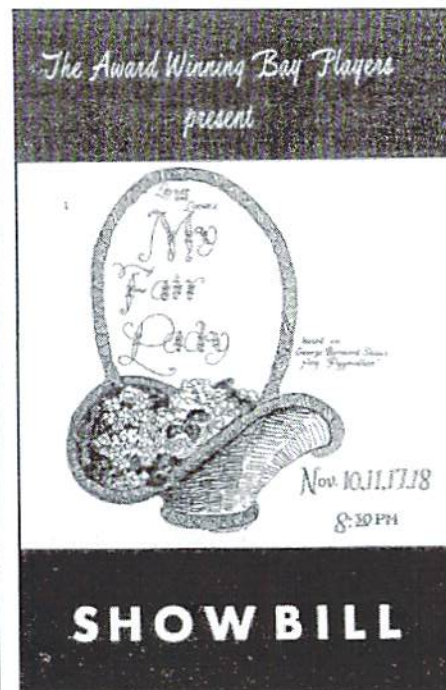
In spite of a massive Save-the-Theatre campaign in the following months, the board of directors made an an-

nouncement in 1951 that the Duxbury Playhouse had failed to meet expenses and gain enough community support to continue. The board was proposing that the Playhouse merge with a school of music, arts and drama founded in 1946 by David Blair McClosky, nationally known operatic singer; then Professor of Singing at Boston University. The backers said turning over the Playhouse to McClosky's school would offer the community "new ways of enjoying its theater without sacrificing any of the old."

### Plymouth Rock Center of Music and Drama

McClosky was another performer with a vision, strongly supported by his wife Barbara. Starting with a group of seven students in Kingston, by 1951 his summer school for musicians had grown to an enrollment of over eighty. His plan was to recruit sincere young professionals and to integrate the arts at a center where young artists could work with and perform under the guidance of professionals. In his third season, he had added an orchestra often, which had expanded to thirty by 1951.

McClosky had been at the point of expanding his school, and felt the Duxbury Playhouse would be the perfect spot. He believed, along with many in the community, that the newly named Plymouth Rock Center of Music and Drama had the potential of becoming one of the great festivals of this country. Most of the Duxbury Playhouse



backers continued their support for the new center.

Playing in his orchestras were musicians from major symphony orchestras throughout the country. His orchestra leader was George Poinar, a distinguished violinist and founder of the Spokane Civic Symphony, who was conducting and teaching at Baldwin-Wallace Conservatory in Berea, Ohio.

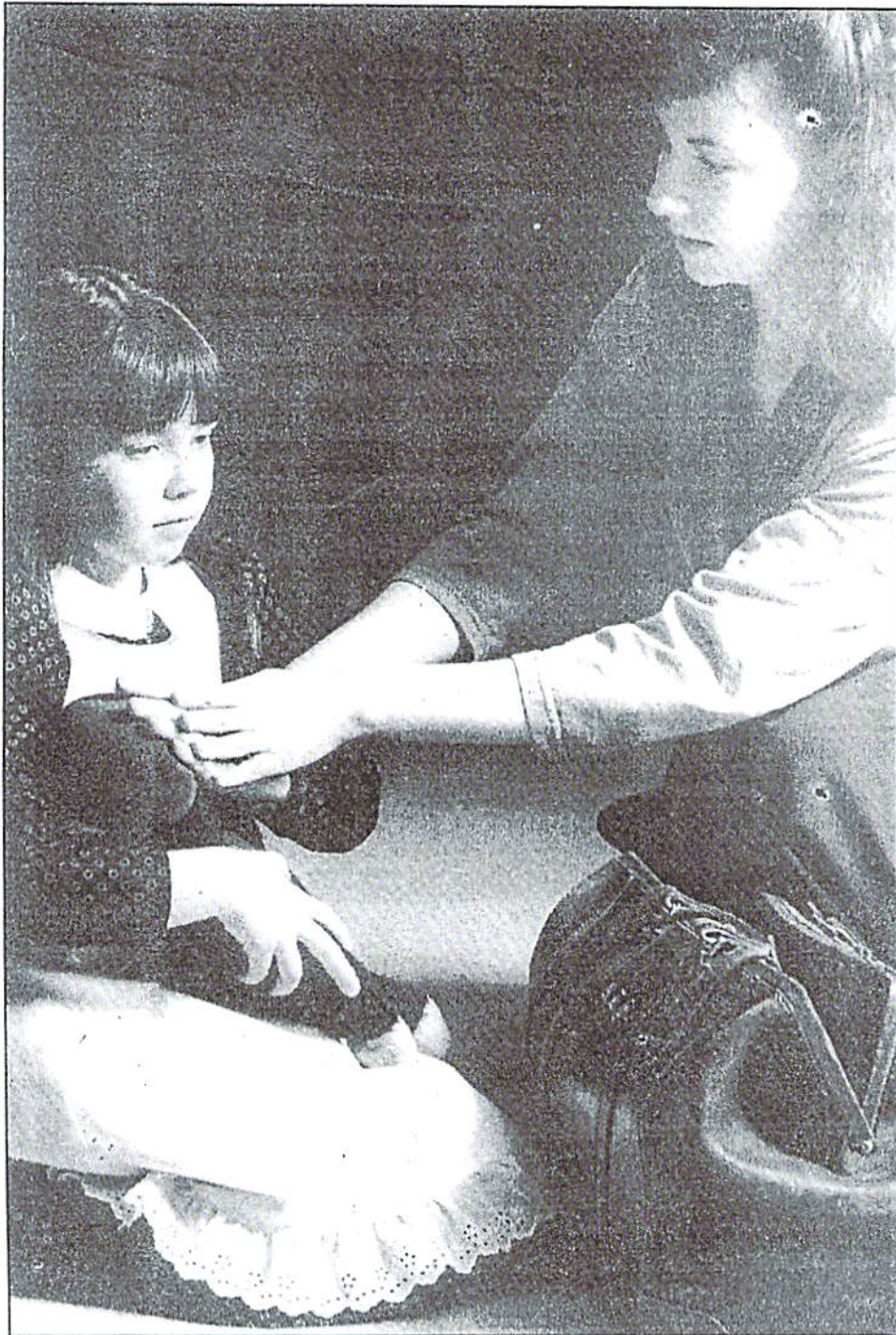
He also brought in a top man in scenic design, Denton Snyder, as his scenic designer and technical director. His stage director was John Reich, Broadway and Salsburg director. Art classes and galleries were added. Operas and

concerts would alternate with plays. Staff, students and crew would live onsite.

Audiences were treated to outstanding opera and concerts for five summers. His *Amahi and the Night Visitors* was acclaimed as one of the best performances of this opera anywhere, including recordings made for TV. Enthusiastic music lovers were excited to have, on what was once a cow pasture, a prospective Tanglewood.

In fact, a local report sounds like a day at Tanglewood. The writer described spending a typical evening watching Poinar warm up the Symphony while the players rehearsed in the lobby for *Blithe Spirit*, which would be produced the following week. While *Rigoletto* was performed for the audience, groups from the Symphony practiced in the new sound-proof rooms in the basement. Outside, under the copper beechwood, a quartet practiced a Haydn Concerto.

The community was very much involved, one news article commenting that while Mrs. Robert Ross and her grounds committee were supervising work on shrubs, mending fences and making other improvements, another group addressed envelopes containing information about the approaching season. Mrs. Paul Bittinger, head of the hospitality committee, was preparing a luncheon, and Betsy Ross and Kate Francke were contacting people for Friends of the Centre. Actors, ushers, set builders and painters from the community.



Katie Reinhalter appearing as six-year old Helen Keller in the Mircale Worker with Annie Sullivan as the teacher.